

LINCOLN: THE MAN AND THE MYTH

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With respect to this paper, I suspect that people will little note nor long remember what I have to say. But if I have made people think about history and Lincoln in new ways, then I am content.

Abraham Lincoln is one of those iconic historical figures. His image stares down from Mount Rushmore where he resides as part of the pantheon of American presidential Gods. His statue sits in the Lincoln memorial, one of the focal points of Washington DC, symbolic – if Frank Capra's *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* is to be believed - of all that is best in the American democratic ideal. Honest Abe, and father Abraham, the rail splitter, the martyred President, a political Moses who led his nation through Civil War and an enslaved race out of bondage are all images and ideas that have become Abraham Lincoln and in doing so cloud and complicate any hope we might have of finding the flesh and blood man.

In 1876 Frederick Douglass, a former slave, said of Lincoln that any man could say things that are true about Lincoln, *“but no man can say anything that is new of Abraham Lincoln.”* Douglass could not have been more wrong. I will in fact argue that the comments of British archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes when she claimed that “every generation gets the Stonehenge that it desires and deserves” –is more appropriate when considering the historiography of Lincoln. There have been many Lincoln's and frequently each generation makes it's own.

The point I seek to make is that we all know – or we all think we know Abraham Lincoln. It is not my intention to review Lincoln's life or to tell or re-tell the oft told stories. Rather I want to help challenge existing ideas and the accepted wisdom. History teaches critical and even sceptical thought. It encourages its students to think analytically. Real History, unlike the version advocated by our Prime Minister is not meant to make people feel proud of their past, it isn't about myth making. It's about accepting that there is no such thing as objectivity. We are all the product of our families, our generation and their values. Once we acknowledge the myth of pure and objective truth we can

begin to be open and fair in our judgements. In the process the real Abraham Lincoln offers us far more than the myth – the mark of Lincoln’s greatness is confirmed by the fact that the man is more than the myth.

The famous British historian Edward Hallet Carr warned – “before you read the history – study the historian” – useful advice.

In the last twenty- five years any list of the greatest American Presidents prepared by academics has included Lincoln. He is consistently rated among the top two (the other nominee is FDR). The modern Republican Party embraces this Lincoln as one of its heroes and yet Lincoln would be a stranger in the ranks of the modern GOP. President Nixon during the Watergate crisis took comfort in the fact that his public opinion ratings were as low as Lincoln’s during the Civil War. People embrace or shun Lincoln for reasons of their own.

Each generation has created its own Lincoln. In the aftermath of his assassination he was the martyred President. He then became the epitome of the real American, the humble self made man from the log cabin. Taking just three of the most recent books about Lincoln by Doris Kearns Goodwin *Team of Rivals* (2005), Joshua Wolf Shenk *Lincoln’s Melancholy* (2005) and the contentious, *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* by C. A. Tripp (2005), we have a cross section of some of the modern Lincoln scholarship. Goodwin’s outstanding historical scholarship reveals Lincoln to be the consummate politician for the all the good and ill that that might bode for any reader. Goodwin’s Lincoln is profoundly ambitious, even driven. Goodwin’s portrait reflects her own political intuition, evident in previous presidential biographies. Joshua Wolf Shank makes the point that comments about Lincoln’s melancholy were common during the nineteenth and early twentieth century but somehow disappeared from 1940. Students of American presidential politics will remember how, Vice Presidential nominee, Senator Tom Eagleton had to withdraw from the Democratic Party ticket in 1972 when it was revealed that he had undergone electric shock therapy for nervous exhaustion. Clearly we are now far more enlightened about many aspects of mental

illness. Lincoln's melancholy needs to be acknowledged because it was as much a part of the real Lincoln as his stove-pipe hat and his beard. C.A. Tripp gives us the 'gay Lincoln'. Tripp quotes from a letter Lincoln wrote to long time friend Joshua Speed "*The sweet violet you enclosed came safely to hand, but it was so dry, and mashed so flat, that it crumbled to dust at the first attempt to handle it ... The juice that mashed out of it stained a place in the letter, which I mean to preserve and cherish*". Tripp's book is more a reflection of the time in which it was written than the real Lincoln. It does not go far in trying to understand the nature of Lincoln's friendships or the differences in language and nuance from Lincoln's time to the present.

In these three books we have just some of the twenty-first century Lincoln's – make up your own mind and go in search of your own Lincoln. In this case you will learn a great deal from the journey.